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AUTHOR Hahn, Byungchai Cora
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ABSTRACT

Twenty-one Koreans were interviewed concerning their perceptions of America. In the spring of 1977, 9 men and 12 women between the ages of 20 and 50 from the greater Hartford and Storrs area in Connecticut participated in this case study. The males interviewed included five graduate students, three undergraduates, and one government scientist. Three of the women had professional status, four were housewives with a Korean college education, one was the owner of a private buiness, and four of the women had very little formal education. The main questions were: How do you perceive your life in America? How are you doing with your job? and How do you perceive human and family relationships, marriage, sex role issues, education, and government in America? Results include the following. Almost all described America as the country where they can remain individuals without any mental pressure from the outside and without having to conform to expected norms and behaviors. All said Americans are kind and friendly toward strangers. Most expressed the feeling that parent-child relationships in America seemed distant, cold, and self-centered. About half said they disapprove of the way in which marriages break up in America. All were pleased with the educational system and voiced positive attitudes toward the American government. Most had difficulty accepting the concept of equality of the sexes and the mingling of sex roles. (RM)

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A CASE STUDY:

HOW TWENTY-ONE KOREANS PERCEIVE AMERICA

World Education Monograph Series, Number Four

by

Byungchai Cora Hahn

Formerly:
WORLD EDUCATION PROJECT

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Introduction

The emigration of Koreans to the Hawaiian Islands and mainland United States began as early as 1902. It is related how several hundred Korean men arrived first as laborers and were later joined by women following marriages that took place by proxy.[1] These men and women, from the lower socio-economic class, had been unable to establish their economic base (namely farming) in Korea, where internal economic and political conflict was bringing confusion and uncertainty to many of the poor.[2] When an opportunity arose for these people to leave their country and go to a new land where jobs were promised, they jumped at the chance. It is apparent that these men left their homeland for the unknown world with one thing in mind; work.

After the turn of the century, the number of Korean emigrants in America remained below 20,000 until 1965 when a new immigration law came into effect.[3] It is now known that more than 700,000 Korean emigrants were admitted to the United States since 1965. Most of them settled in urban areas such as Los Angelos, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Honolulu and Seattle.[4] There is a wide diversity of Koreans in the United States: some are highly trained professionals, semi-skilled workers, business men and women, as well as the families and relatives of these people. Also, it is reported that many Korean immigrant professionals have worked in non-professional jobs during the past decade.[5]

The rapid increase in the number of Koreans now living in America elicits certain questions concerning their general conception of life in this country and the effect which American culture has had upon them. Koreans in different professional and social levels in America would be expected to have different life experiences and life styles in relation to their place in society. Their confrontation with American culture will mean different things to them and be perceived in various ways depending upon what they see and how they interpret

what they see. It is, then, reasonable to assume that Koreans of all social and professional levels will eventually arrive at different life views and conceptions. Are their conceptions of life in America greatly affected by their position and function as members of American society? How powerful a role does their earlier socialization play in the acculturation process in America? The purpose of this paper is to deal with these questions.

Procedure

Twenty-one Korean men and women (nine men and twelve women) were interviewed through conversing in Korean in the spring of 1977. They are residents of the greater Hartford and Storrs area. This group included eight men who are now receiving higher education (five graduate students and three undergraduates), one government scientist, three women with professional status, four housewives with a Korean college education and four women with very little formal education. One woman was the owner of a private business. The group ranged in age from twenty to fifty years of age.

Method

An appointment was made to interview each person individually. Each interview generally lasted from one to three hours. One interview occurred coincidently, however, when a group of young Korean women married to American ex-servicemen enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed. This of course turned out to be a group interview.

In general, interviews were conducted in an informal, casual setting where the individuals could feel relaxed and free-spirited to talk. The main areas of questions were: How do you conceive your life in America? How are you doing with your jobs? More specifically, how do you perceive human and family relationships, marriage, sex role issues, education and government in America? The areas

to be investigated were: What seems to be the common response and reaction on the part of Koreans when confronted with American mainstream culture? What common conflicts do Koreans experience and what are the ultimate, if any, strengths which Koreans carry among themselves? Does the length of time the individual has lived in America, the level of education he/she has received in the United States, the level of mastery of the English language, and the difference of socio-economic and professional status influence the way he/she perceives America? These are the specific areas this paper will attempt to analyze.

How Do These Koreans Perceive America?

Almost all of the twenty-one people interviewed described America as the country where they can remain individuals without any "mental pressure" from the outside and without having to conform to certain expected norms and behaviors. Eleven persons mentioned that they truly enjoy America's well-equipped recreational facilities which are available to the general public, such as parks, libraries, museums, highways, and information services. Three men expressed joy at being able to plan and communicate independently or through official channels. Many of the Koreans interviewed agreed that the pace of life is indeed much faster in America, and they often feel pressed for time to do other things beside work.

One woman with a professional degree, who is employed in her field, said that she feels no limit to progress and competition in her profession. She also felt that her modest success was due to the fact that she is living in America, a nation which provides such opportunities to any foreigner. A highly trained male engineer who works for the government in New London expressed contentment that he can live in America with self-dignity and respect. According to his statement, the high point of his contentment is the fact that he can lead his private life without social or political pressure, and still dedicate himself

to his work without having to worry about losing his job.

Contrary to these positive views shared by people with modest professional success, one couple who came to America three years ago for graduate study have quite a different life view. In their opinion, a cloud of superficiality hangs over America—the people seem very artificial and are conditioned to behave distastefully. The husband, whom I believe was the source of these notions, seemed to have projected his feelings upon his wife. She expressed a strong desire to return to Korea as soon as her husband completes his education, saying that she felt both mentally and physically exhausted most of the time.

A moderately successful divorced woman who owns a business in the Hartford area admits that a woman in her situation could never experience the same kind of freedom and opportunity had she remained in Korea. She said:

> This is the country for me and people like me. No one stops anyone if a person tries hard to make it. No one frowns upon women just because they are divorced. In Korea, I would have become just another helpless woman who is alone and single.

Another positive view of America was given by a young student who emigrated to America when he was sixteen years of age. This young man (now twenty-five) still exhibits some signs of an identity crisis caused by the abrupt move to the United States during his adolescence. Although he repeatedly asserted that he is very nationalistic (meaning he is very much concerned about the welfare of Korea), he loves America and American ways. He says that he is very comfortable and can readily understand America's youth culture, but feels that he still espouses a Korean value system when it comes to dealing with serious matters of moral judgement. He expressed his desire to succeed financially rather than professionally.

Another young student whose parents brought him to America when he was five years old exhibited an even greater Americanization of his thoughts and ways. He was very concerned with completing his college education so that he can get a good

job after graduation. The things he mentioned were generally indistinguishable from what his American-born peers might say. Nevertheless, he did acknowledge his sensitivity to his racial difference, although he has not suffered because of this. He felt that America has the best workable system for those who want a democratic type of government.

It can be summarized that these people do enjoy a certain privacy which the American life style offers, especially having come from a country where there are rules about doing things the "right way" and people are watching every move you make. Convenient public facilities, as well as the availability and reliability of public services are also appreciated by these people who have known no such luxuries in their former land. Like many Americans, they feel that the pace of life is too swift. Generally, Koreans who received American educations early in life and have mastered the English language have more positive attitudes toward America and their own personal achievements. The people who have been modestly successful in their business or professional ventures are generally content with life in America. On the other hand, the group of people who came to America as graduate students tend to maintain Korean values and even to resist American culture. Nevertheless, all of the Koreans interviewed recognized that they had come to America to achieve their life goals because America is the only country which can offer them such opportunities.

Korean Views of American People

All twenty-one people said that Americans are kind and friendly toward strangers (e.g. people whom they don't know personally). Most women interviewed stated that they had experienced the feeling that Americans are much more sensitive to the other's position and need. However, they felt that this phenomenon is true when the situation is on a one-to-one basis, but not in a public or group situation.

When asked how they felt about the humanity of Americans, the majority of people responded that human nature is universal and Americans are as humane as any other nationality. Although no questions were asked about the humane qualities of Americans, some conflicting views were raised by some of the male interviewees (all graduate students, having lived in America an average of three to four years).

One man was quite puzzled about what he saw in his office one day. He simply could not understand how a colleague who shared the same room with another professor just sat and read while his friend (another man who shared the same room) was trying to move countless boxes of books. He (the Korean man) became very aggravated and finally asked his colleague, "Aren't you going to help him with these boxes?" His answer, very characteristically, was: "Well, he didn't ask me. I don't know..." The point was that this man strongly felt that his friend should have helped with the moving even without being asked; he simply should have volunteered his services. He could not understand the indifference and total lack of involvement this man displayed during the moving. Four men mentioned the different kinds of relations they find among professors and their students. They feel that the relationships between professors and students in America are rather shallow in nature when compared with the deep, lasting friendships formed in Korean (or other Asian) universities where professors totally commit themselves and become father figures to their students.

This is obviously a complicated area requiring much more exploration in order to produce an extensive study. Culturally different perceptions on human friendships, different ways of respecting other's privacy and the enormously diverse setting in which teacher-student relationships must function within certain restrictions are all complex factors. They create enough differences to puzzle even people from much more similar societies.

On the one hand, the Korean respondents felt that Americans were kind and friendly; on the other, they seemed impersonal, inconsiderate and self-centered. What must be taken into consideration here are the many types of social situations in which Americans behave and react differently. In this writer's opinion, Americans act differently in a particular situation according to their social and formal training. For example, when confronted with a situation on a one-to-one basis, they are personal, concerned and involved. In public or in a group situation, however, they may tend to be cold, impersonal and indifferent. In the eyes of some foreigners this inconsistency may be irritating or mystifying, until they gain more insight into the American cultural scene.

How These Koreans View American Family Relationships

Most of the twenty-one Koreans interviewed (with the exception of the three women married to Americans) expressed their feeling that parent-child relationships in America seem distant, cold and self-centered. Some women felt that each individual generally appears lonely and isolated from his/her family and that some young mothers are more concerned about their careers than their homes and children. Two men stated that some of their American friends are anxious to leave home and contact their parents only when they are in financial need. They suggested that the reason for this might be that Americans place too much value on a child's independence during the socialization process. Many could not understand how parents accept money for room and board once their children begin working. However, these views were not endorsed by a twenty year old man who came to America at the age of five. He felt that American families have relationships as close and tightly knit as Koreans and that the American parents he knew deeply cared about their children's welfare. He also believed that the American way of life permits children to help augment their parents' income; in fact, this seemed very natural

and reasonable to him. This young Korean man viewed American family relationships as warm, loving and sensitive to each other's needs.

One other thing which should be mentioned here is that several Koreans who had recently emigrated to America had strong opinions about the treatment of older Americans by their families. They felt that putting aged parents (voluntarily or involuntarily) in nursing homes was a very cruel and inhumane thing to do.

It is certainly clear to this writer that some American family relationships are surprising and even upsetting to newcomers. This, I feel, is not due to an actual lack of warmth and close family ties, but a misinterpretation of the manner of cultural expression of these emotions. We also know many Americans who assert economic independence and stubbornly refuse parental help once they become working members of siciety. People from developing countries simply are not familiar with the excellence of many modern American nursing homes and thus feel that putting the aged in homes is "abandoning" them.

<u>On Marriage</u>

About half of the men and women interviewed said that they disapprove of the way in which marriages break up in America. Koreans feel that although American men and women display their love and affection openly (which is not done in Asia), their true devotion and commitment to each other is questionable in light of the high divorce rate in the United States. One man in particular said that American marriages seem precarious primarily because of the lack of a strong bond of commitment on the part of both husband and wife. Almost all the interviewees stated that the dissolution of a marriage because of personal differences or unhappiness was unthinkable; in their opinion, these were the selfish acts of two irresponsible adults. According to their standards, once a couple is married, they should base their lives around each other, and, more importantly,

their children.

Interestingly, none of the Koreans interviewed mentioned or even acknowledged that there are happy and healthy American marriages—happy and healthy to a degree that marriages in more traditional or surpressed cultures are not expected or experienced to be. What they might be unaware of is that different expectations are made in American marriages where couples' personal, mental and emotional well-being is considered to be much more paramount than it is in other societies.

On Sex Roles

This was a subject area where Koreans gave simple and uneasy answers. Enough indications were made to demonstrate that this was not a favorite topic of conversation with them. When asked about their sex roles in their home life, most men hurriedly answered that they do not mind performing what are traditionally defined as "feminine" chores. I could not help but think that these responses were the "proper" thing to say about sex roles at this time in history, rather than a true indication of what these men really felt. However, four women did acknowledge that their husbands help them with the dishes and laundry occasionally. One woman's comment adequately reflects the attitudes of the other Korean women interviewed: "I don't mind cooking three hot meals for my husband. Being a woman I can at least do that much."

Contrary to this position, a woman who received her college education in America and now holds a professional job stated: "My husband and I have no rigidly set rules. We meet chores as they come, and we both share all kinds of work around the house."

There is no doubt that many Korean men and some women have set sex roles in which they feel comfortable and secure, regardless of what they say in public. The men project their conviction that they are wholly responsible for their wife's

well-being and, for that matter, their destiny. The men seem to believe that they are to lead and protect their family without any help from their wives. On the other hand, women seem to enjoy their feminine and passive roles as wives. They are not at all assertive about their equal rights as partners and are oblivious to the current issues raised by the women's movement.

On Education

Three mothers with young children said that they were very pleased with the type of education their children are receiving in American elementary schools. They believe that the Korean educational system produces pressure and anxiety on the children by burdening them with great amounts of rote memory work, whereas the American system seems to be geared toward individual growth and personal well-being. They were impressed with the way in which American teachers helped their children with their particular needs and problems. Mothers of young Korean children seemed to be genuinely satisfied knowing that their children will have opportunities to further their education in this country and become respected members of American society.

With regard to higher education in America, all seven male graduate students said that American universities not only teach them academic theories but train them to apply what they have learned. Well-equipped research laboratories and the available written materials were greatly appreciated by these men. The informal and relaxed relationship between students and professors was another thing they commented favorably upon. One comment made by two different men is noteworthy, however:

> In the American university scene, when class is over, everything is over. You do not see your professor again and do not expect to see him unless there is a special reason. But in Korea, the tie between a professor and his students is much stronger once they have initially established the teacher-student relationship. A permanent relationship will be formed and your professor will become a father figure if that is what the students want.

On Language

It is the opinion of many researchers that linguistic conflict can bring psychological problems as well as practical inconvenience to an individual. Many Koreans in America, including the people interviewed for this paper, do seem to have acute problems with the English language. The exception is those very few who spent their early years in this country. Kim Hyung Chang writes in his article "Education of the Korean Immigrant Child":

> All immigrants from non-English speaking nations face immediate and difficult problems of communication upon their arrival in America. The difficulty is exacerbated for Asian immigrants whose cultures and languages are radically different from those of the American people. Korean immigrants are no exception. They have come to America with a language whose grammar and phonology are so drastically different from those of English that there is virtually no affinity between the two languages.2

Although language was the major area in which many Koreans find conflict living in America, no one seemed enthusiastic about talking on the subject. Thus, it was difficult to gather detailed information on what effect the language problem has upon these people. Only four women (the ones married to American ex-soldiers) said that they are attending adult evening classes to "learn as much English as we can". One woman expressed her frustration that she could not help her daughter with her homework due to her language deficiency. The young woman who had done her undergraduate work in America showed me a poem she had written which was published in an outstanding literary journal. Only one man admitted any difficulty with English. The young man who came to America at the age of sixteen said that his reading comprehension is still very slow and tedious. None of the Korean housewives mentioned experiencing any difficulty with the English language.

Thus, it was soon realized that this was not a topic that they wished to discuss in depth. Why? It may just be that to most Koreans, knowledge of English as well as reading and verbal skills reflects their respective level of

education, personal achievement and academic background. English is required in all Korean schools and is indeed a prestigious subject, which all students are eager to learn. Mastery of the English language means that you are a better student, and being a better student means quite a bit in Korean schools. One who possesses verbal and comprehensive skills in English will no doubt be highly respected for his/her capabilities. It is no wonder then, that this was a sensitive area for many Koreans to discuss or present any detailed information about their problems.

On American Government

When asked how they viewed the American political system, the three men who previously expressed their appreciation of America's public education and recreation facilities again voiced positive attitudes. They felt that America has both reliable and efficient systems to help people. Two men apologized for not knowing much about politics in general. They added that they wish to remain in a country where they will suffer no "mental pressure". (Presumably this means that they want to remain living in America). One man mentioned that he was impressed that a man like Jimmy Carter, who was virtually unknown five years ago, could become president through the "proper channels" (e.g. public election). However, the response of one couple deserves attention here. The man is a doctoral student in the field of applied science and has lived in America for a little more than three years. When asked how he felt about the American political system, he answered jokingly: "We have the same democratic government here as in Korea. We elect a president and have three government branches. They are all the same." And he smiled. As for his wife, she is the woman who told me at one point that she resents Koreans who speak to her in English when an American friend happens to join the conversation. She also said that she enjoys living in America, but knows that she can never fit into American culture. It was not difficult to

realize that the wife had been greatly influenced by her husband's philosophical views. Indeed, the couple seemed to be cynical about life in general. I feel that their resistance to change and negative attitude toward American culture is a result of their unique personalities and not indicative of the attitudes of Koreans living in America in general.

One businesswoman who divorced her husband a few years ago said:

> The American political system is a wonderful system for average people like me. I could have starved in Korea being a divorced woman without personal wealth. This country provides some kind of opportunity to everyone who tries.

More positive comments on the subject were made by the young women married to American men. They claimed that the American government enables people to work and live decently. They felt that they were respected as long as they work hard and abide by the rules of the country—something which was impossible in Korea.

It can be concluded that the Korean men wish to avoid any comments on the political systems of any nation out of fear that any derogatory remark against the oppressive Korean government may bring harm to themselves and their families. Women seem freer about expressing their personal views on the American political system, a fact which may be proportionately due to their lack of involvement in political situations.

<u>On Their Life Goals</u>

Almost all of the people interviewed appeared to be ambitious, industrious, and determined to succeed in whatever they set out to do. For many, leaving their homeland was a big step toward realizing their goals and dreams. Because many of the Korean immigrants are from middle class backgrounds, their life goals are firm and rather ambitious. Having come from a country where the importance of education as a prerequisite to personal success was stressed, they seem very

education conscious. Also, the conscious realization that they have come to America to better themselves and achieve their life goals gives them an added incentive to succeed in their chosen fields.

Conclusions

Differences in sex, the level of education and personal success, as well as the amount of time one has spent in America all contribute to the way in which each Korean perceives his life in America. Yet, regardless of these factors, most Koreans in America eventually arrive at similar moral and value judgments. In the areas of marriage, personal and family relations, Koreans tend to uphold their traditional value structures. It also appears that the time has not yet come when Korean men and women can accept the concept of the equality of sexes and the mingling of sex roles. Most Korean men cling to their position as the defender and protector of the family. Korean women usually feel more adequate and secure playing the traditional female roles, rather than that of the liberated career women.

The levels of professional success seem to play a large part in the interviewees' positive attitudes toward American life. Koreans who came to America as mature adults and have lived here less than five years are less likely to be acculturated into American ways regardless of their education or social status. On the other hand, Koreans who came to America earlier in life show much less rigidity in adapting and accepting American culture and its value system.

Relative mastery of the English language is the key factor in determining whether a Korean can perceive America correctly and accurately. Due to this language barrier, the educational progress of many Koreans (particularly women) who are both sensitive and eager to learn is impeded. Because they generally do not interact directly with other Americans, their primary exposure to English

is through the mass media. Persons with verbal and written skills are able to interact with Americans which in turn promotes better communication and understanding among people.

Finally, Koreans in the United States all seem to be striving toward their goal of becoming functional and respectable members of American society. In spite of the cultural conflict and language difficulties, they are making significant progress in their endeavors. Without a doubt, they all realize that education is the chief means by which they can attain their life goals for themselves and future generations.

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